# PUBLIC SECTOR FUTURE podcast – Episode 4 – Seamless services: Digital access to birth certificates

Summary: In this episode we speak with Yolanda Martínez about one of the key challenges of successful digital transformation, the ability to work across boundaries and barriers to share and use data, and to better deliver services to people who really need them. We discuss how she worked across federal and regional boundaries while leading the National Digital Strategy of Mexico to give everybody the ability to obtain their right to identity through digital access to birth certificates.

**Talent:**

**1. Olivia Neal [host]**

**2. Yolanda Martinez [guest]**

[MUSIC]

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Hello and welcome to Public Sector Future. This is a show for anyone who cares about using digital approaches in the public sector to deliver better outcomes. I’m your host, Olivia Neal, and together we’ll explore stories from around the world, where public servants have been successful at delivering change. And we’ll meet the people behind the stories, hear their first-hand experiences and their lessons learned. Throughout the series, we’ll discuss technology and trends, as well as the cultural aspects of making change happen.

Today, we’re joined from Mexico by Yolanda Martinez. I first met Yolanda when we were both working for the government and we were part of a group called the Digital Nations. Yolanda was leading the National Digital Strategy of Mexico at the time and was responsible for the digital government unit at the federal level. And her experience in leading digital transformations was really clear.

Over the past couple of years, she’s been leading the work of the Inter-American Development Bank in Chile. Her experience in digital transformation is much sought after. She’s been in the **OECD** peer reviewer for digital government strategies in various Latin American countries and is an honorary advisory board member for the digital strategy of El Salvador. And quite rightly, Yolanda has been recognized by Apolitical as one of the 20 most influential people in the world in digital government.

So, we’re really happy to have her with us. Yolanda, thank you for joining us today.

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** Thank you, Olivia. It’s lovely to be here. I’m very excited.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Wonderful. Well, today, we’re going to be talking to Yolanda about one of the key challenges of successful digital transformation, the ability to work across boundaries and barriers to share and use data, to better deliver services to people who really need them. We’re going to be talking about how she worked across federal and regional boundaries in Mexico to give everybody the ability to obtain their right to identity through their birth certificate in a digital manner.

So, Yolanda, could you start us off by telling us what was your role at the time?

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** I was the National Digital Strategy Coordinator at the Office of the President. And previous to that, I was the Unit Chief of Digital Government in the Ministry of Public Administration. So, I was part of a great team responsible for defining and leading the execution of the national digital strategy in Mexico.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Fantastic. And was that a large team, or were you really trying to make this happen with quite small numbers of resources?

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** We started small with a very visionary leader. So we started small and then we start adding skills.

At the peak of the major implementation of the strategy, we reached almost 250 professionals, very diverse, designers, developers, engineers, user research, an extremely diverse team. And we also have digital teams in each of the government agencies at the federal government. So, the entire network or focal points for implementing the digital strategy objectives and initiatives reach almost 2,000.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And maybe for our listeners around the world, could you tell us a little bit about the size and scale of the challenges that you are dealing with? How many people does the Mexican government serve?

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** Okay, we’re a big country, so we have 125 million people. We also are a federation. That means that we have a central government. We have 32 states. We have independence in their different regulations, some provisions of the digital service, for example, and we have more than 2,400 municipalities, independent as well.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Wow, okay, so lots of levels, large-scale population, lots of stakeholders to manage.

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** Yes.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** on this specific example of the digital birth certificate service, what was the problem that you were trying to solve?

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** Birth certificates are one of the most common documents requested in order to access all government services in all levels of governments. So, in order to access a birth certificate, people needed to go to their place of birth, in order to get this document. Some states like Colima have this service online, and in Mexico City, which is the capital of the country, the National Population Registry had an office where people could go and get access to birth certificates from all states, but you needed to go physically to the capital of the country to access that document.

So, this was a huge barrier to access a very basic identity document. So, when President Enrique Peña Nieto and Alejandra Lagunes launched the National Data Strategy, back in 2013, one of the main objectives was to radically transform how government delivers services. And the priority was to make them available from a single point of access, named **gob.mx**. We integrated a national catalog of government services and then we identified which services were the most demanded by people, and birth certificate was one of them.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Right. So, you started by saying, what are all the services that we’ve got? And then you cataloged them and looked at the demand. And, and in this case, for this service, you said people had to come all the way to Mexico City to get their birth certificate. How long is that journey for people, just to give a scale of the size of Mexico?

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** First of all, not that many people can come. When you think about Mexico and our relationship with the U.S., we have more than 25 million Mexicans living in the U.S., and an estimate of almost 17 million that are in the process of legalizing their stay

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Oh, of course, so it’s not just people who are in Mexico; it’s people who are Mexican and, in any country, elsewhere in the world, wow.

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** Yes. So, they needed to go back to their place of origin, meaning taking an airplane, if they have the resources to do so, go to the little town, hope for the civil registry in that little town to be open and available to find the book where the registry was made, and scan a copy and give it to them.

So, it was actually very controversial that we are the fifteenth economy in the world, that eighth most-visited country, worldwide, and a very basic document, it was not available easily to people. And doing this research, in terms of which services we were going to start prioritizing, in terms of our digital services standard, we found, in talking with the National Population Registry, that they have a very important initiative going on for putting all the registry books, since 1930s up to that date, online.

So, they – they had a lot of resources for many years in standardizing data entry into a huge database. So, it was a lot of work already done, but not publicly available. So, that was a very important discovery to say, you know, this is very good, you’ve been doing this great effort of digitizing all the registries since 1930, so let’s set up a team, let’s work on a plan on how we can use the Digital Service Standard, that we launched, within gob.mx to put birth certificates online. So, that was something extremely important, not to start from scratch, but I actually had looked at what the government has been doing before our presidential term and build from that.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Yeah, absolutely. That sounds like that was a very foundational piece, having that that data entry, that collation, really having started. But even with that foundational piece, you then have the challenge, I think, of having to work from the federal government across with each of the different regions and cities because it sounds like they played a really important part in the service.

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** Definitely. It was very interesting because in, each of the states, you had an official form. So, it was very important to make a new strategy on how to approach 32 different governors, each of them very proud to see the seal of their state on this official paper that is within all your birth certificates, your marriage certificate, your death certificate, unfortunately.

So, it was a very important, I will say, way to do things and nobody questioned.

It took a lot of work within the National Confederation of Governors to sit down to present what was the service need in terms of democratizing access, making a lot of empathy with how hard it was for people to access a very basic document that, by the way, it was a constitutional right. It took a lot of negotiation on the agreement. Some states were very open, very eager, it doesn’t matter the political background. Other ones were more difficult. Some others required to change local regulation because the paper form was a very strict regulator to guarantee security. So, we had to work a lot with the legal teams, not only the digital teams, and also in the political arena. It was a lot of work.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And how did you go about creating that empathy and telling the story and an empathetic way? Were there any tactics that you used to help people in the state understand the difficulties that citizens were facing?

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** Definitely. First of all, every one of us had to go, at some point in our lives, to a civil registry to get a birth certificate.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Everybody had shared this experience.

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** Yes. So, even though you are the governor now, you had to go to school, you needed to take the birth certificate to school when you graduated, when you – even if you had kids, you had to take the birth certificate of your kids to get them to school. So, it’s a very common service, and it’s a very common topic, unfortunately, that you go, and the office is closed, or the system is not working, and you need to go back another day, and you waste a day in your life, to get a birth certificate document. And we also put numbers on that.

So, we did our work in terms of really assessing user needs, and what was the cost, in terms of opportunity costs for people, that the barriers in terms of guarantee a constitutional right, when you think about how important it is. Millions of people who live in the U.S. are in the process of legalizing their status there, to get access to an identity document that can be very easily solved from the IT perspective, because it was not technological challenge, when you think that we have **gob.mx** and a lot of things going on, in terms of standards and interoperability.

We did the hard work to present a case for the governors with that – the most important thing was the political will and the sponsorship because everything else was a process of close collaboration with the state legal teams, and the technical teams, to build the capacity if they didn’t have them and – and to make little adjustments to the state legislation to comply with gob.mx standards, but mostly to really have a lot of team building, right, at the end. When you put the political agenda aside, you find people that are extremely committed to serving their state.

They feel proud we did it, right? We put 32 teams to work, collaboratively, in interconnecting the systems – in reaching our agreements. And it’s just a service that takes less than one minute to get, but in order to do that, it was a lot of collaborative effort to align a process that should be extremely easy for people to use.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, I think, you know, when you do – when you do get into a service that is really simple and straightforward, and easy to use, it’s very easy for people who are using it to underestimate how much work has gone in behind that to make that happen. Because you’re saying there, that now, that service takes people only about a minute to use. That is a huge step forward from previously having to travel across the country, or get on an airplane, to come in person and get something.

So, when you concluded these conversations with the with all of the states and you’ve got consensus, what was the conclusion that you came to? Did you reach a data sharing agreement, or were there a set of standards that you agreed on which enabled that data to be shared?

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** I think we agreed on the MOU, which was to share the same digital services standard. The National Population Registry did a very good work in standardizing data, and interoperability API needed to connect and to validate data, because even though you can print your certificate on basically any type of paper, what is most relevant is that actually you don’t need to request a birth certificate, because you can go and directly make a consultation to the database of that registry.

So, you can do both things, either print it, or that we work a lot with government agencies, not to request the document in print format, but actually go and use the validation service that – ability for them to avoid asking people that document. And I think the biggest incentive for the governors was to think about the major event that we did with the president, all the governors, all the head of ministries responsible for participating and collaborating, because it was a long journey. So, when the service was finally launched, I remember we were in the first page of all major newspapers.

So, all governors were very happy actually, sharing the experience. this is a huge message to the people that we care that we are able to put aside any political differences that we may have in terms of political parties leading each of the 32 states. But when we think about serving people, we all agree that this is important, and that this is a huge step on how people experience and relate to the government.

And for that, you know, technical team perspective, I really enjoyed collaborating with very motivated public servants from the states, because we built a community, which is extremely relevant, even for them to keep pushing their local digital agenda, their local digital efforts, because that – then we knew that we signed, it was not only for birth certificates, but actually for any data service. So, we did the hard work in terms of setting up a standard that then has sped up other processes and other government services that were very easy to build up on it.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, I really like what you said there about – you were laying the foundations, not just for this project, but for future projects as well. And also, the way that you were explaining there that you thought about this project, not just in terms of how do we take a paper birth certificate and allow people to print that off themselves, but it sounds like you also more fundamentally thought that through and challenged the assumption that paper certificates would always be needed, and looked for technical approaches to allow departments to call on the main database, rather than always putting the burden on the citizens. So, I think it sounds like you were really thinking through what are the digital opportunities that – that the country could embrace to move the – move the services forward?

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** Definitely. And I think it was the rapid adoption of the service by the people encouraged digital agencies to see, oh, yeah, people is not scared, right? They actually are grateful that we saved them time, so it’s easier just to make a validation to the through that API and just check, you know, yes, Yolanda has a valid birth certificate, so now I can get her a passport, or a driver’s license, or any other service based on the fact that I already validated her identity.

**OLIVIA NEAL**: Do you know how many people accessed the birth certificate service once it became digital? Did you have any feedback in terms of numbers of people?

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** We have millions, millions of transactions. it was within gob.mx, the digital service with the highest satisfaction, citizens satisfaction rate, more than 95%. it was a huge breakthrough in terms of a service that is so demanded, and that helped us make the case that it doesn’t matter where you are, if we make a service easily accessible, and if we focus our efforts in serving people’s needs, people use the service. You come in a little town, you know, with your phone, and if we save you to travel to another town to get your birth certificate, and make the service very easy, you will use the service. You don’t need to be in a city, highly educated, to use – government digital services.

No, our work is to make it very easy for people to use, and if they have the need, they will use it. And I think I feel very proud. Every time someone tells me, oh, yes, I went to gob.mx and get my birth certificate or my professional license, it’s super easy, I was like, yes, because we put a lot of work into that. It’s my best gift when someone says it’s super easy. It’s only the best motivation that we can have as a public servant with tech.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think you should, you should feel so proud, because that is hours and days of people’s lives that you have saved them, and – and not only time, the stress of that type of bad service brings to people’s lives. If you can alleviate that as a public servant like that is such a mission to be part of. So, I think there must be many people in Mexico who would want to thank you for that.

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** And, and we’re happy because we did our work.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And so, if you were talking to other public servants who were inspired by what you’ve done, and who are thinking about how they could work better across state and federal boundaries, or between cities and regions in a similar type of project, what advice would you give them on where to start?

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** First, define a strategy with very clear objectives and enablers, because it’s very easy to get lost in, the many requests that you get from your bosses, – you know, the ministry. It’s easy to get lost. Then define your digital design principles because this is the core to guide the work and spend quality time in building digital service standards and reusable components, because that’s what gives you a strong foundation to scale up.

Identify which services are the most demanded. Because when you work on that, and you really change the experience, then you reach a scale and you get the attention. And focus on really integrating a multidisciplinary team. And I will say that this is the most important aspect when you have, you know, high political support, and you have a strategy, you really need a team at the edge that can help you deliver. And that team can be internally or external or within other government agencies that really shared the vision and the commitment to use technology to transform how government serves people.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, I think those lessons are a great set of lessons, and I think really focusing on all of those sounds like a great place to start. One final question for me, and in this podcast, we want to share and highlight the work of people all around the world, public servants who are moving digital transformation forward. Is there anything that you’ve seen and in other parts of the globe that you would like to share and suggest that people have a look at?

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** Definitely. I’m a super fan of Peru’s advancement in digital government, And the digital government secretariat is run by Marushka Chocobar and a great team. And when you think about Peru, it – it’s a very challenging country in terms of political changes. They have various presidents in a very short period of time. And the digital team has been very consistent, have been really leading a huge effort in terms of building a national data transformation system, working and making gob.pe that single point of access.

So, that really inspires me because it is challenging when you have a lot of uncertainty at the highest political level. So, when you manage to have a team that delivers, even though you have those changes, it’s important because that means that, even though they have been under those changes, data transformation now is a state policy. And that is very meritorious in my opinion, and I think other countries that really inspire me, and that I feel grateful because they helped me a lot in Mexico work, is Estonia, under Siim Sikkut, and Uruguay and José Clastornik that finished his term a few years ago.

They are world leaders and true mentors, and they really built great cooperation among digital leaders. And I think that’s extremely important. And I will encourage everyone listening to this, that – look for your peers. Everyone is having the same challenges that you have. We have Digital Nations, which is a great network of leaders that really believe the world can open and collaboratively save us time. You need a team that supports you in the journey, and that team, other leaders in the world that are very open to share and to collaborate. And for me, a good example is Digital Nations.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** That’s fantastic. I think, as you said, it’s not easy driving digital transformation in a – in a public space, and I think that, that that community of peers and people who are trying to solve the same problems, who are colleagues and who were friends as well, it’s so important in that. But I think, as you also said, when you do get it right, the passion that you can feel and the pride that you can take in what you’ve achieved is just like no other role. So, so many congratulations on what you’ve already achieved. And thank you for spending the time with us to share these lessons today. I think we’re going to be really useful to everybody who’s listening. So, thank you so much, Yolanda.

**YOLANDA MARTINEZ:** Thank you, Olivia, and thank you to all the team that is doing the podcast.

[MUSIC]

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Thank you to our guest, Yolanda Martinez, and thank you to all of you for joining me today on Public Sector Future. Our goal is for you to learn something new and be inspired to think differently about your own journey. If you enjoyed today’s episode and want to help others find it, please share, rate and review the show. It really does help people find and discover new shows like this one. And remember to listen and follow wherever you get your podcasts. Check out our show page for links of all of what was discussed today. And please do reach out. Send your questions and feedback. You can find me on Twitter @livneal, or on LinkedIn, or you can email us at ask-ps@microsoft.com. Thank you and see you next time.

#

END